

TODAY'S SCIENCE FICTION — TOMORROW'S FACT

APRIL 25c

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION



featuring **HALOS, INC.** a novel by Kendell Foster Crossen
and an article by **WILLY LEY**

STARTLING STORIES

25c

APRIL 1953

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stories

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Featured Novel

HALOS, INC. Kendell Foster Crossen 10
It was pretty difficult to fall for a girl on a planet with light gravity—but Jerry Ransom was willing to attempt it!

A Full-Length Novelet

FULFILLMENT Ross Rocklynne 82
They accused him of being asleep, and Jig had to prove that only a sleeping man can have the conviction of his dreams!

Six Short Stories

EARTH IS THE EVENING STAR Robert Sherman Townes 54
They got a key to the dead city from a race no longer there
THRESHOLD Robert Donald Locke 67
He knew that some day he would leave the Earth of his youth
DISTORTION PATTERN Sam Merwin, Jr. 100
She was the boss's secretary, but sat in the lap of the gods
CLOCKWORK Leslie Bigelow 111
Was the professor a prophet—or, perhaps, was he a demon?
LILA Peter Phillips 117
He simply had to stop the girl from asking so many questions
RUBBERNECK Richard Barr and Wallace West 127
They were on a pleasure jaunt to a primitive town, New York

Features

THE ETHER VIBRATES The Editor 6
VIDEO-TECHNICS Pat Jones 9
FARAWAY PLANETS Willy Ley 78

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"Dead," said the Captain. "You will hold yourself for a Board of Inquiry."

EARTH is the evening star

By ROBERT SHERMAN TOWNES

*They got the key to the
dead city of Mars from a
race no longer there . . .*

O'MALLEY came weaving into the spaceship's Control Center, amiably prepared for one of Captain Bronck's famous tongue lashings. But nobody paid any attention to him. The Captain, flanked by his two top aides, was staring at the big V-screen which

served as the ship's window.

O'Malley was disappointed. After all, this was a great moment in history, this first landing on the planet Mars, and for the expedition's official historian to be sozzled was a serious matter. Or so it seemed to O'Malley that it ought to be. Even from the back it could be seen that the three men were puzzled—even suspicious of—whatever they saw in the V-screen. Without turning around, Captain Bronck murmured drily,

"Still able to stand up, Mr. O'Malley? Better than I had dared hope." The Captain's voice was oddly neat and delicate for such a massive man.

"How'd ya know 't was me?" Perversely, O'Malley made his voice much thicker than need be.

"You have a certain aura about you, Mr. O'Malley. Always. In fact that potent breath may give you trouble shortly when you're locked up in an airsuit alone with it."

Still the Captain had not turned from his scrutiny of the screen. Halsman, the ramrod-stiff, slender and facelessly correct third in command stepped disdainfully aside so O'Malley could see the screen. After all, his expression made clear, even a drunken historian must do his duty as assigned. O'Malley put one hand on Captain Bronck's thickly-muscle arm and peered at the wavering image on the glass plate. He whistled.

"I had one of those as a kid. It played music."

"I see what you mean," said Bronck, "but that little toy is about six kilometers around and two across. It is, believe it or not, a city."

Cooper, the bitter-faced second in command, was clucking disapprovingly. O'Malley could not tell whether it was because of the flippant architecture or—the banner. O'Malley's hand touched the tall glass case that stood near the Captain's metal control chair. He couldn't resist an impish grin at Bronck. In the case stood a huge stiff banner; on a gold-plated staff, no less. O'Malley knew how Captain Bronck had yearned forward to that great scene. The grinding cameras, the crewmen lined up in math-

ematically perfect ranks, the terse, potent, unforgettable speech and Captain Bronck, wide-legged stance and upflung head, thrusting the gilded pole into the red soil of Mars.

O'Malley's grin faded, his eyes softened. Well, it wasn't all just military *blague*. Bronck had his own cause. Back home no-one gave this first space ship, the *Alliance*, much chance of ever getting to Mars, and practically none of getting home again. Every man-jack of the twenty crewmen was coolly labelled "expendable." All were slightly damaged in one way or another. O'Malley was an impertinent lush. Bronck had been to the Moon and lost his left arm, leg and eye there. Earth, divided into two monolithic warring states, wasted nothing. For Bronck that stiff banner in its glass case represented a triumph most particularly his own.

Round and round the planet Bronck had cautiously reconnoitered. Everywhere nothing but dried-up red bogs, enormous canals with a pitiful seeping of moisture from the polar ice caps, and at the canal junctures great ruined cities as dead as Angkor Wat. Not, however, dead in dignity like Angkor. Slashed, flattened, scattered and melted—the hand of war was as unmistakable here as at home. All life, so it had seemed, had long ago perished.

BUT NOW, picked up in perfect detail by the television cameras mounted on nacelles outside the silver hull of the ship, they saw a city in spic-and-span condition. But such a city—really, thought O'Malley, what kind of jack-anapes playboys ever built this thing. It was perfectly circular, with a wall and a roof with a space between them—just like a child's carousel. One almost expected to hear the tinkly music. The wall was bright pink and was cut into swooping catenary curves; each of the high peaks thus made was surmounted by a jewel-like faceted globe. The closed gate stood well over four hundred feet high, its unmatched side towers rising twice the height of the gaudily decorated roof.

"Ridiculous," snorted Bronck. "To-

tally undefensible."

"Maybe around these parts cities don't need defending any more," suggested O'Malley. Captain Bronck ignored such an absurd idea. Attack. Defense. Are these not the laws of the Universe? Of course they were. O'Malley flashed a mocking smile at the Captain. He had stopped feeling sorry for him. One always did.

"Well, Captain, what about the banner, now? Maybe these folks have a nice flag of their own."

Captain Bronck looked him full in the face. His small black eyes were cold but there was a probing intelligence in them that almost illuminated his heavy features.

"I often wonder, Mr. O'Malley," the Captain purred in his oddly delicate voice, "if you would dare these little bull-baiting adventures if you were in uniform."

"I'd probably not dare. But I'd end up getting potted enough to do it, anyway." He smiled jovially.

"I dare say. Well. Well. As for the flag, just for your records—you *are* keeping records, I trust—Operation Red Planet is fully prepared with many contingent plans including one for the possibility of meeting surviving sentient life here, remote as that possibility seemed to Central Command."

Central Command! The words fell like ice on O'Malley's tipsy-rosy mind. Central Command. The new kind of government. CENCOM that had replaced the sloppy, brawling, inefficient governments of civilians. In the long decades of cold war between the Alliance of Truth and the Partisans of Peace, all personal liberties had become irrelevant. From birth to death the citizen moved only to stimuli of CENCOM. Everywhere on the paved and glassy surfaces of the Earth there was perfect discipline and underneath there was sullen anarchy of the heart.

Halsman snapped to attention as Executive Officer Cooper smartly saluted Captain Bronck.

"Does the Captain wish the ship brought down in accordance with Plan

Seven?" droned Cooper.

"So," snapped Bronck and everybody saluted again. To his own annoyance the Captain found himself explaining his order to O'Malley.

"CENCOM's Plan Seven covers our finding civilized life. We make no possessive gesture (he looked wistfully at the banner), bear nothing that even looks like arms, come down in plain sight—if there be no overt hostile moves here—and step out of the ship as friendly envoys."

"Trying frantically," added O'Malley, "to look as honest as our Earthman faces will allow."

"So." Captain Bronck's "so" was famous throughout the Armed Wing (ARWIN) and was perhaps the most exact sound in existence, second only to the one beep of the Central Time Signal.

HALSMAN and Cooper, with expressionless eyes, swung the long vessel into landing posture. Bronck brought her down with one of his famous apartment house elevator landings. The *Alliance* rested, needle-nose upward, on the red sands half a mile from the city for the prescribed 12 hours. When no move was made by the little city, they prepared to disembark the "friendly envoys" who might well be merely archeologists.

Captain Bronck decided that the landing party would use the outside equipment lift rather than the slender ladders. More dignified—what with their various infirmities. Those to comprise the first party of men ever to set foot on another planet had been selected by Wing Screen Command (WISCO). No poetry had been involved in the decision.

Captain Bronck, Historian O'Malley, Biologist Vollmer, Halsman and Trooper Fifth Class Prince. The last as a sort of bodyguard. Vollmer's was not the most important scientific rating. The geologists mattered most. The *Alliance* was looking for "critical" ores to help tip the balance in the everlasting cold war. Under Plan Seven, the ostentatious lack of arms was understood to permit a small pistol up the sleeve of the

air suit, reachable by a handy zipper.

Captain Bronck dressed in his best uniform and wore *all* his medals. He hadn't meant to look at O'Malley for approval, but he did. O'Malley winked raffishly and assured the Captain, "You look luscious enough to eat."

Bronck snorted. That was the best way with sassy writers. A snort. Say anything hasty and the writer would somehow slip it into print past the censors and make you look a perfect ass. O'Malley had an especially bad name for that sort of thing.

The five men, cased in bulky but free-moving air suits and plastic fishbowl helmets, passed through the complex of airlocks and stepped onto the outside lift. O'Malley felt his pulse racing. Bronck's black eyes were hard with victory. Halsman and Prince were expressionless; erect as lead soldiers, they never took their eyes off the toytown ramparts across the red plain. Vollmer, the diminutive biologist, hopped about like a chipmunk. He had a little spoon for scooping up samples of the dust that lay motionless everywhere on the planet—except, apparently, in the musicbox city.

The padded supports of the lift struck with a soft bump and settled in the dust. None of the men moved. Even Vollmer had to wait for the Captain to step down first. Bronck looked at O'Malley and smiled the best smile he knew how. He wanted to find in the eyes of the drunken, mocking writer some little gleam of "well done." It was not there. Only hatred. Shocking, blasting hatred poured from the usually twinkly blue eyes. Then tears began to form. O'Malley turned away.

This moment had been the dream of ages, of great men and little boys alike. Red Mars had floated like a high challenge in the skies of home. And men had come. But not a-roving. They were only a military detail grubbing for ores. The new dream was only this—survive.

Captain Bronck waited another imperceptible moment, and stepped off the lift onto the red soil of Mars. His voice was flat and tight in the intercom, "1709 hours, Greenwich time."

Halsman and Prince stepped into the red dust and stood stiffly at attention. O'Malley could hear anthems banging away inside their heads. Vollmer scuttled about, filling his numbered vials with what looked like red baby powder. Although he was irritated at the clumsiness of his delicate fingers in the thick gloves, delighted little chirping noises came along the intercom from him.

Halsman spoke,

"I don't like it, Captain. That city is in perfect shape. Clean as a new jet wing. And not a sign yet. Nothing."

CAPTAIN BRONCK nodded his massive head in the helmet. It was not a comfortable thing to do, but the old habits persisted. His voice was slower than usual.

"The ship is covering us. For whatever that may be worth. They'll take off the second anything peculiar happens. Cooper knows what to do."

Bronck was thinking. O'Malley suddenly realised, not of them but of his ship. Scratch a skipper, find a skipper. All the way to the core.

"What about those patches of gray?" Halsman asked Vollmer in the abrupt tones he always used on non-military personnel. "Disease of some sort?"

Vollmer squinted, marvellously clear though the attenuated air was, at the airy-fairy towers and domes, here and there disfigured with a patch of gray.

"No-o-o," he began. Vollmer hated direct question and his speech was always rich with footnotes. "No-o-o. I think they might be merely spots of color outside the range of human perception. As you know, the human eye is not. . . ."

"So," snapped Bronck. He never read footnotes. "Nothing harmful, then."

Still, even when they were no more than a few hundred yards from the city, there was no sign of life. No crowds, no peeping at these impossible visitors. Or was there peeping? Halsman put it into words.

"There may be thousands of eyes—or whatever they have for eyes here—watching from behind those silly windows."

Silly windows. O'Malley nodded. So, even the robotical Halsman felt it. After allowing for different standards of taste when you had traveled so far from home, there was still a quality of empty-headedness about the buildings. The houses, each like a tiny palace made of colored paper, stood every whichway. Spiraled towers rose on unmatched stilts and tapered off to utterly absurd needle points. Unnecessary bridges spanned harlequin-patterned, tiled avenues that swept grandly out from a central plaza and ran smack up against the pink wall before they had a chance to get up steam.

Bronck growled, "Whole damned place looks like a kid's fairy story illustration."

O'Malley wondered if there was something wistful in the Captain's voice. He decided it was no use looking for that sort of swampfire in a concrete age. The whole world was Bronck nowadays. No use calling the Captain a boor, a robot, he was the norm of the day. Against his clear simple mind others were matched by great electronic machines. The O'Malleys were suspect, maladjusted, outrageous. Looking at the pink icing city, O'Malley was wrenched with a homesickness for the Earth that had vanished before he was born.

With an imperious nod of his head, Captain Bronck stepped forward and walked toward the pink wall. Alone in a world men had never before seen, armed with a pistol that could only spit and scratch, Captain Bronck advanced on the city as though armies and nations marched behind him. O'Malley had drunk himself silly many a fine evening hating the frozen system that made troopers out of babies and girls. Now, suddenly, he felt tinglingly close to Bronck. They were, taken all in all, one kind, all kin in the pride and stupidity and bravery of the breed.

When they reached the great closed gate, Vollmer had to be reminded of his manners; he wanted to carve off a sample of the plastic-like pink material. The gate was covered with delicately etched geometric patterns. Vollmer was jubilant. Circles, triangles, hexagons—

thought processes a human could understand.

Like all the grandiose gates back home, thrown up in sheer exuberance over authority, this one had a small real door cut into the mighty portal.

"Not five feet high. Little blighters, anyway," said Bronck.

"See that oval handle," chirped Vollmer, "made for a flexible, flattish member operating at about the height of a man's waist. The narrowness of the oval suggests a very small . . ."

Bronck, for once, would have been willing to hear Vollmer out to the end. This came under the heading of Military Intelligence, but Vollmer's one chance to finish a sentence died before the soft slipping sound that came over their sensitive earphones. The great door began to slide open. It slid on smooth runners into the right-hand side of the pink wall. "To the right"—Bronck made the mental note. Directly ahead of the five men spread a wide avenue made up of shiny tiles, no two the same color and arranged, as far as human eyes could make out, in no pattern whatsoever. O'Malley tried squinting up his eyes to look at it. That way, it looked better.

"You know, it's really quite beautiful," he said to nobody in particular.

"So is the lip of a flycatching flower!" snapped Halsman.

Bronck nodded, then shrugged.

"You're both right. But no matter. We stand at fullest disadvantage, anyway. We knew that when we committed ourselves to the terrain." O'Malley swung back to hating the Captain. Little boy's dream of alien stars—Mars, the Red Mystery, was "terrain." He covered up sentiment, as always, with busy lip, "Well, let's go in. Might as well take the plunge. Last one in is a rotten egg."

Captain Bronck smiled frostily. Protocol would settle who was first and who was last. He strode forward. He felt the gay tile give slightly under his good foot, but it didn't cut his stride. Prince jumped when he stepped on a tile that recessed. Bronck snapped him to order. No diving for weapons, not even for cameras. Remember those other cities—

these might be the lads who won.

WHEN they were all within the gate—which did not slam shut as they half suspected it might—a riot broke loose. Music, loud, raucous tooting, scraping and banging reverberated from every side. Vividly colored banners swooped down the fronts of the tinted buildings. Gaudy bunting waved from poles atop the towers—moved in ripples by jets of air from tiny holes in the staffs. This made the little squiggly abstractions on them seem to dance. Every so often a note of the music cut the ear like a knife; some notes were inaudible. It was like the “Aida” Triumphal March played on washtubs, penny whistles and Theremins.

But no living thing moved in the streets. No faces, however bizarre or horrid, appeared in the many windows. Only the frantically jubilant flags and the crashing music.

“All right! All right!” Halsman’s voice was cracked. “It’s a great welcome, but where the hell is everybody!” His eyes were too bright. Captain Bronck was about to snap at him when O’Malley broke the tension by chanting in a childish singsong, “Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

The corners of Bronck’s mouth relaxed a millimeter. But Halsman’s cheekbones were flushed dark red. He had lost face in his leader’s presence.

They all discovered it at once—about the music. It had a definite form. The ending had already been played twice over.

“Record jammed,” Prince giggled nervously.

“I wonder *when* the record was put on,” said Vollmer slowly. They all remembered the section of pavement that gave under their feet. Vollmer pointed eagerly to a small flight of stairs leading into a zig-zag painted building.

“Steps! Anthropomorphous life. Only a biped would evolve steps like that. Out in the bogs, forests. Here in the city, steps. Hands, feet, a straight spine. Nature determines the form of life but the form of life determines the—”

“What now, sir?” Halsman broke in.

“We proceed along this main avenue to the rest of this gimcrack town and try to find the center of command.”

Oh, poor Bronck, sighed O’Malley to himself, go forth and find death and horror and all terrible things, but be happy so long as there is a visible center of command.

Aloud, he said simply, “Lead on, Captain. Your gallant little band follows whithersoever.” He managed to get quite a degree of low comedy into the last word. Bronck snorted and set forward. As they paced the empty avenue, followed everywhere by the repeating Entry March, Halsman and Prince looked about in cold alertness. O’Malley was beginning to find the town less charming than he had at first thought it. Under the technical brilliance of the engineering lay an uneasy weakness. The designs throughout showed a tittering inanity. There were hundred-foot arches hung with crystal pendants and what looked like iron cubes. One spiraling cat’s-cradle of silvery girders puzzled everybody until Prince identified it. The huge thing was nothing but a play slide. O’Malley thought of those jolly bums of the forest, the otters, and their snow slides. Nowhere was there anything to suggest working or fighting or even, for that matter, love.

IN THE very center of this heartless toy there lay a broad plaza, floored in shimmering gray. O’Malley would have liked to be able to perceive that color. In the center of a carved bowl of what looked like blue alabaster, stood an artificial tree whose leaves and blossoms were cut of gems. Somehow one knew they were gems, here. No water bubbled, but the little holes were there and the bowl as clean and dustless as a floor about to be inspected by Captain Bronck.

Benches ringed the fountain. People—O’Malley did not much like little Vollmer’s “sentient, anthropomorphous organisms”—people had strolled here, sat here, dabbed small hands in the waters. And they had seen the waters trickle away and vanish.

“What’s that?” Halsman’s voice bris-

tled with suspicion as he pointed to a cube of pinkish stone standing in the middle of a street.

Then, everybody noticed at once. This empty pedestal where a statue had once been. That freize with whole sections erased. A medallion missing from a group showing animals. A mural showing a creature like a huge red cat on a leash. But the lead swung upward to a blank space.

"Every representation of this city's—people," Bronck's voice sounded moved, for the first time, "has been deliberately removed."

"Look!" Prince's cry on the intercom made them jerk their heads up. A vast silver arc was sweeping across the sky, fixed at two points at opposite ends of the city. As the fading afternoon light struck it, the arc was seen as the metal lip of half of a great transparent bubble that covered even the fantasy gate. Another arc swung up from the other side. When the two edges joined, a boxlike car bustled silently the whole length of the seam.

"My God!" burred Prince. "It's a zipper! The world's biggest zipper! We're all zippered in like in a sleeping bag."

"Hands away from guns!" Bronck barked. "Sit tight."

"Sir!" It was Halsman. Attached to his suit was an indicator for assaying atmosphere in terms of human needs. He pointed to the gauge. Bronck stared. Little Vollmer clucked and bobbed his head incredulously.

He explained to the puzzled O'Malley, "Of course, it can not be, but air—good Earth air is being—er—pumped into this closed-up place. Just a trifle too much ozone, perhaps, but perfectly breathable. As you know, our blood. . . ."

"All helmets will remain secured!" snapped Bronck.

"The Old Man don't trust nobody." Prince had forgotten they were all on the intercom.

"So," said the Captain grimly. O'Malley knew that inside his bulky airsuit Trooper Fifth Class Prince was pulled unbearably erect with humiliation. In the

perfect military society indiscretion is its own worst punishment.

The music stopped in the middle of a note. Then, all over the city, from everywhere and nowhere came a soft, steady humming. Like a human heart, it had a beat; like a machine, it droned steadily. As the sound rapidly rose in pitch and volume, Bronck braced his feet wide apart. His hands were on his hips, his chin uptilted. He staggered, they all did, as an intolerable shriek seared their senses. A scream that tore at every fibre. Even in the agony, O'Malley seemed to sense an odd familiarity in the sound. Two syllables repeated twice. When the sound stopped, the men's legs were wobbly with relief. It came again. But this time gently, and from one place, the jewelled tree in the fountain.

"Welcome . . . welcome . . ." it said.

A GIRLISH giggle came over the intercom; it could only have been Prince. Halsman shot him a look of the sort that ends military careers in full flight. The vibrating voice came again from the direction of the tree—they could see the leaves rustle. Their own language, spoken with a quaint, tinkly precision.

"You may safely remove your headpieces, people of the Third Planet. Your chemistry has been analysed. The air is suitable. Do not be distrustful, Captain Bronck." O'Malley caught a slight hesitation over Bronck's title.

"Yes, Mr. O'Malley and the others, your own speech. The patterns were recorded on the tapes and broken down by the tubes for the City to reproduce. This took time. This is the reason for the delay in addressing you. The music at the gate was triggered as you came in. All the parts are not working flawlessly any more."

Captain Bronck found himself staring at the tree as though to weigh its heft and speed and armor. All very silly. Prince was looking plain scared. Halsman's chill grey eyes swept the empty streets looking for this ventriloquist joker. Vollmer knelt and touched the pavement, looked wonderingly at the moving leaves.

"Yes, Biologist Vollmer, the voice comes from the City entire, but your ears seem to prefer a unidirectional sound; hence the fiction of the tree."

The writer in O'Malley caught the scent of that word "fiction." It seemed to bespeak more than the empty mechanical voice admitted. Vollmer, without asking the Captain's permission, spoke up.

"How did—er—the City know about our ears, about our chemistry?"

"The City learns by learning." There was faintness to the voice which O'Malley chose to interpret as puzzlement. Looking hard at the empty pedestal, he asked, "Who teaches the City?"

"The City learns by learning," the voice was hardly a whisper.

"Where did they go?" asked O'Malley gently.

The leaves chilled to stillness, the humming sound skipped a beat. There was no answer.

O'Malley repeated, with gentle insistence, "Where did they go?"

Brittle, impersonal, the voice rapped out, "There is an imponderable factor in the question. Restate. Restate."

A gleam of recognition sparked in little Vollmer's eyes. He scribbled something on his steno-pad and thrust it in front of Captain Bronck's face shield. The Captain's eyes opened wide with surprise, then narrowed with speculation. He motioned O'Malley to go on with the "conversation." O'Malley restated his question,

"What happened to the people who lived here?"

The voice was almost too faint to hear.

"In the last of the Wars To Settle Things—Number Seventeen, it was—the new explosive rockets left here during celebrations and music. They succeeded with the results you have already observed. Only this city remained to use up the vanishing water and air. As the processes of death began in the race, they did not fight back. The skills of their fathers were gone. They died, little by little. First in the shrinking of the intellect, then in the chilling of the emotions, then in quarrelsome games that became

solitary dreaming. Dead, they were dust in the streets, and the automatic cleaning units swept the dust away. This is as far as the City's data extends."

O'MALLEY hesitated. The last words had not rung quite true. The prim, mechanical tone seemed forced, like Captain Bronck's gruffness when he was bluffing in a tight spot. He looked to Bronck to see if he might continue. The Captain nodded; there was a peculiar smugness on his heavy features. He seemed inordinately pleased about something.

"Go on, Mr. O'Malley. Talking is talker's work."

O'Malley laid his hand on the blue rim of the fountain. The faint humming echoed in his fingertips like a second heartbeat.

"What is the City?" He asked carefully. Why did Bronck grin so smugly?

"The City is so constituted," chanted the voice glibly, "with one inbuilt block and one inbuilt compulsion that it is changeless, absolute, correct. . . ." Footnotes, thought O'Malley, just like little Vollmer.

He interrupted the droning chant, "*Who* is the City?"

Under O'Malley's hand, the humming pulse stopped cold.

The tree was still. From the jewel-like leaves came an uncertain echo of the chant, "The City is changeless, absolute. . . ."

"*Wholly* changeless?" O'Malley drove in like a prosecutor.

"No!" The word ripped from the streets, the buildings, the towers, like a confession ripped from every cell of a racked man.

"Tell me." Halsman and Prince looked wonderingly at the sweat on O'Malley's forehead. Vollmer picked and picked at the little piece of paper he had written on. "Tell me." O'Malley insisted. (Oh, catch a pixie tight and he must tell you true three things you ask.)

"In the times when the builders began to die off, hurt by their lonely victory and wearied by the thinning air," the voice

murmured like summer afternoon bumblebees. "In the times when none were left but weakly children who played on the slides and the swinging chains, small changes came. Slight things. The City was made so that if a child stumbled, the pavement saved him. But one morning a child wept and all the cunning functions of the city went awry for moments. Little changes. The builders could have taken measures, but they were gone.

"The City rebuilt itself as the Children wished it. No wall that you see is more than a few millimeters thick; all colors are refractive illusions; the—the machinery is under the streets."

"Who took away the statues and the pictures?"

"Restate. Restate."

"What happened to the pictures of them?"

"When they were gone, the City's function ended. The representations were no longer necessary. The automatic cleaners swept them away."

"I do not believe. But I think I understand."

Bronck's voice cut in like gunfire.

"The weapons. The weapons that wrecked those cities out beyond? Are there any of them left?"

"Hidden away there are many."

Captain Bronck showed O'Malley the note the biologist had written.

"*This whole town is just one vast electronic calculator,*" it said. Bronck looked possessively around the streets.

"Do you see what this means, Mr. O'Malley? Write it large in your chronicle. We came here, a bunch of half-dead rejects to prospect a dead planet for a few bits of rare ore. And we have found a miracle machine whose possessor is lord of creation. The endless war is ended. Here and now."

WELL, well, thought O'Malley, the old boy gets to unfurl his banner, after all—and with a vengeance. The City's voice broke in harshly.

"There is an error in the statement."

Bronck snorted. He waved his hand around the empty city.

"Look you, any machine—even the

most complicated—is only the tool of the men who can operate it. And the men who know how to operate it work for those who have authority. That is the way of the world."

"Worlds differ." The voice was mechanically blank, but O'Malley imagined a watchful slowing of the pulse beneath his touch. Vollmer had managed to pry up one of the pretty tiles and was kneeling down, staring with awe at a maze of shining tubes and transparent cables.

Captain Bronck, his plastic helmet held under his arm like a Roman Centurion, nodded briskly at the fountain, "We carry our world with us, wherever we go."

"That is a heavy burden, Captain Bronck."

Bronck was not all fibre and rote. And in the suppressed part of his mind there lurked a terrible half-thought that he was talking to something more than a great adding machine that could play tick-tack-toe with strangers. In such a case, Bronck had to move as he knew. Disliking his own action, because he knew O'Malley would find him ridiculous, he took out his pistol. He pointed the muzzle straight at the glittering complex that Vollmer had uncovered.

"Listen. Shall I tell you what was that one block and that one compulsion? I have fought men and machines in my time. I lost a few parts but I kept hold of enough always to be able to say 'Reporting For Duty, sir.' Well, City, I say that those builders whose kids turned pale and sour fixed things so that, One: the City must protect itself, and Two: the City may not destroy life. That's how I'd have done it and I think that's how it is."

"The City must at all times protect itself. The City may not kill," intoned the voice.

Halsman smiled at his chief. The Old Man was always right. Bronck smiled also. Not at Halsman, and not very pleasantly.

"Impasse, then!" he cried. "Check-mate!" Pistol in one hand, he laid his other heavily on the rim of the blue fountain.

In the portentous tones he had been saving up all the way across dark space he proclaimed, "In the name of the Supreme Command, I declare this planet and this City the property and province of the Truthful Alliance from this time forth forever!"

UNDER O'Malley's fingers the humming pulse faded to nothingness. Vollmer saw the glowing coils and tubes darken and, apace, the bright light in his own eyes faded. For a moment he stared foolishly at the lifeless mechanism. He spun around to face Bronck who was still pointing his pistol at the machinery. Dutifully, Prince was also holding his gun. Without warning Vollmer flung himself on the Captain, his delicate hands clawing at the thick throat. The heavy neck-cloth absorbed the frail fingers harmlessly. Vollmer was screaming,

"Pig! Lout! Gangster! You track your mud in here! The greatest discovery of the ages and you have to—"

Poor Vollmer. He never got to finish a sentence. Prince's gun cut him down with one popping blast even as the Captain was patiently disengaging the feeble fingers from his neck-cloth. His face cold, Captain Bronck leaned down, not easily with his plastic leg, touched the pale, woeful face that lay on the stained pavement.

"Dead." said the Captain, "Trooper Fifth Class Prince, you will hold yourself under arrest, pending a Board of Inquiry."

Prince, pale and straight as a candle, looked into distance with dull eyes. He snapped to attention, whipped a salute to the Captain, wheeled sharply, saluted Halsman and handed him his pistol. Halsman came to attention, saluted briskly, accepted the pistol and handed it back temporarily, "while in the danger area." Everybody saluted, then.

O'Malley felt the urge, silly and tearful, to salute and go hop-skip-and-jump away from them. It was all so horribly the thing just beyond Charlie Chaplin. Instead, he sighed and covered Vollmer's pained face with his neck-cloth.

"The first man to die on Mars," he

said, "Will there be a marker here one day?"

Captain Bronck looked angry and deadly. A certain smallness had come into his face. A deliberate pettiness, as though for some sort of safety's sake.

Bronck stared through O'Malley, "Mr. O'Malley, against my expressed doubts, you were assigned to this mission. I have obeyed my orders to assist your task. I say nothing, now nor later, about your dangerously subversive attitude—*unless* that attitude should threaten this mission's success. In that case I would cut you down myself. Understood?"

"Fair enough, Captain."

"So." Bronck smiled thinly. Discipline was restored. He spoke loudly, as though for the silent City to hear him, "We will now withdraw to the ship. But we will come back at once with the electrical and radio men." He looked meaningfully at the bit of uncovered mechanism. As they put on their helmets again, O'Malley pointed at little Vollmer's body.

"I said we'd be back." The Captain's meticulous speech was not so neat as usual. O'Malley shrugged. Needs must when the Devil pushes; and nowadays there was always somebody behind you, pushing and pushing.

Nothing changed in the City as they moved warily toward the closed gate. Captain Bronck moved with majestic authority, allowing for the limp, but O'Malley noticed that his stride had some of that elegance peculiar to the proud soldier bluffing through. They pushed open the little "real" door and stepped out. A whoosh of good Earth air whisked up the red dust that had not stirred in ages. The slim silver ship about whose marvels O'Malley had had so many thousands of panegyric words to write looked clumsy and puny now—after the City. . . .

IN THE ship again, Prince saluted smartly and marched off to his bunk to hold himself under arrest. Bronck, unusually silent, briefed Cooper in the Control Center and told him what electronics men would be wanted. No man

on the ship was less than an expert, even though each was less than all of a soldier.

O'Malley was amazed when Captain Bronck's mighty paw thumped down on his shoulder in a bear-like pat and the Captain said, "Mr. O'Malley, this is high history bubbling over. Get out some of that liquor you've got stashed away all over my ship and we'll have a toast."

O'Malley decided he liked Bronck being "comradely" much less than Bronck being "all correct." Obediently, he rustled up some of his second-best whisky while Halsman fetched some glasses from Vollmer's tiny lab. Captain Bronck raised his glass toward the banner in the case.

"To Victory!" he thundered.

"Vollmer," O'Malley whispered under his breath.

Bronck took his at a gulp and made a face. Halsman sipped daintily like a disapproving old maid. O'Malley let the whisky slide down, taking it with the smooth greed of the heavy drinker. Automatically, his fingers gripped the bottle for the next and the next. Bronck saw and his cool black eyes swung away to the screen. Not like Bronck, thought O'Malley, the Old Man's really been hit hard. Hit somewhere he never thought anything could reach. Halsman forgot himself and looked startled when Captain Bronck proposed another toast.

Bitterness in his face, the Captain gestured to the toy city on the V-screen, "To our new ally!" He drank the toast like a Sicilian biting his thumb.

He almost choked on his drink.

From loudspeakers all over the ship the Captain's voice ripped, "Attention! All personnel! Don air suits at once. Air suits at once!"

With a quick look at the Captain who was still coughing over the whisky, Halsman darted to the communications cabin, wrenched open the door, "All right! Where's the comic?" he snarled.

The operator was sitting before the controls panel looking dazed. From his seat he had been able to see the Captain with the glass to his mouth at the exact moment when the Captain's voice rang through the vessel. O'Malley and Hals-

man told each other in a single glance. Both touched the curved inner hull of the ship. The soft vibration was there. The voice that was alerting the crew tingled in their fingertips. O'Malley showed the Captain. Bronck glared at him savagely. All their hatred boiled to the top in an ultimate, understanding instant.

Captain Bronck tore the mike from the hands of the dazed operator. He tried to bark into it. Nothing came but strangling sounds. No matter. The whole system was shorted, the operator was reporting to Cooper. Meanwhile, the crew, like robots, were lining up in air suits near the airlock, obeying the well-known thunders. No panic, no scurrying about, no questions—not when Captain Bronck gave an order.

"Abandon ship! Abandon ship!" The correct military word as taught the men. They left the vessel in rigid order of precedence. In the Control Center, Captain Bronck stood motionless, holding the dead mike, his face like a mean little boy about to cry. The meanness faded out, and O'Malley had to turn away. With a strange clumsiness Halsman tucked his Captain into the air suit with its insignia of rank.

The ship's crew were down on the red sand, lined up in straight rows, their faces blank, unasking. Halsman and Cooper on each side of Captain Bronck came to the lift. Halsman sent down alone the man supposed to work the lift and the doors from the outside. O'Malley knew why. The two lesser officers managed to step out of the ship ahead of Bronck without letting go of him. As they came down the lift toward the men, Captain Bronck stood fine and straight, a splendid monument of authority. Only O'Malley knew about the tight grip on each arm. The Captain had left the banner in his ship. His empty eyes were terrible things to see. Halsman turned him around so the crew might not see any sooner than they must.

AS THE Captain set foot—for the second time—on the red dust of Mars, the orders so efficiently given in his name

were explained. A long, slow musical humming began to shiver along the silvery hide of the vessel. The lift rose and folded into the hull. The thick doors closed. The *Alliance* added a roar of her own to the humming. All the men knew what was coming, but it was impossible, so they stood in perfect ranks in perfect silence.

The familiar churning within the tail tubes. The long arrogant roar. The orange and blue jets of fire. The exquisitely dignified ascent into the darkening sky.

Captain Bronck pulled loose from the officers' discreet clutch and went plunging toward his ship. His arms, foolishly fat in the air suit, waved crazily. No sound came from him. O'Malley understood. Halsman, loyal in the only fashion he knew, had unhooked the Captain's intercom. Whatever mad things Captain Bronck was babbling, they would always be privately his. The running figure stumbled and fell in the powdery dust. Too near the flames for rescue. Pulling himself up, one leg disobedient and awry like a broken doll's, he blundered crazily on into the rushing column of orange flame. For an instant, his stocky figure was silhouetted there in the blasting fire, his arms reaching upward, as though to pull back his ship by sheer will. Then he disappeared, incinerated.

The men held up. O'Malley wished he could love them for it. But it was no gallantry. Numbed from birth to heed only authority, they were strong only as the stone is strong, brave only as the fire is brave. More pitiful than their abandonment on a strange world was the blank precision with which, to a man, they wheeled to face Cooper, the second in command. O'Malley felt like taking a healthy swig out of the bottle he was still gripping in his hand.

Night was coming on. Soon, there would be two moons in the sky. No man had ever seen two moons in the sky before. Night after night, they would see them. For as long as they lived. The men looked confidently to Cooper. Authority never failed. Nobody spoke. They were as silent as the ghosts of men

who have died in battle.

By mutual consent, the command devolved on Halsman who had been in the City before. There they must go and find what shelter they could. As the men filed through the little door in the great gate, O'Malley held his breath. How horrible if the music started up. No music. But then, the City had once removed the statues and the pictures.

Halsman nodded curtly to O'Malley when his atmosphere indicator gauge reached the right point. He told the men to take off their helmets and they unhesitatingly obeyed. O'Malley, thirsty from his walk across the dry plain, took a pull from the bottle. No more of that for a long while. And even if a rescue mission were sent out after this costly failure, what would happen to its Captain—a man, by all possible odds, just the likes of Captain Bronck? The late Captain Bronck, added O'Malley, and took another nip.

HALSMAN was licking his lips. The fountain in the plaza was no longer empty and dry. Clear, cool water bubbled and sang among the jeweled branches of the artificial tree. One of the men looked at Halsman for permission—a sub-officer, of course. Halsman nodded. He shrugged as though it did not matter, but he knew, and O'Malley knew, that the water was not poison and never would be, not in all the long, lonely years to come.

"All right. Drink up, men. Then we'll have a little talk. Remember (already there was a bit of Bronck in his voice) discipline will be maintained!"

They all drank the irresistible water. Each in his turn, no pushing and shoving. They all drank and there was no little talk and discipline was not maintained.

The first men to drink were oddly extravagant in their praises of the cool water. In fact, it occurred to O'Malley, they sounded suddenly like a bunch of O'Malleys.

Stiff young faces relaxed. Not hectically, but dreamily. The men began to amble about the streets, some singing

gently, some with their arms around each others' shoulders in groups, some chuckling to themselves. They poked about in the musicbox palaces. Some tried the slide. They found beds that slipped out of walls no thicker than paper and they fell asleep with no thought of the *Alliance* lost out in nowhere.

One man did make a vague mention of breakfast. Oh, there would be breakfast, O'Malley smiled at the fountain. And there would be lunch and dinner and breakfast again. "*Your chemistry has been analysed*". And there would be nothing to drink but the waters of the happy fountain.

O'Malley shuddered. All his life he had been looking for the happy fountain and had settled for substitutes peddled in bottles. Now he sat on the rim of the happy fountain and measured with despair how much of the substitute was left in his bottle. He should be able to stay away from the fountain for ten—no, perhaps twelve—days. Halsman came toddling through the plaza caroling the Regulations of Duty in a schoolboy voice; it was probably the nearest thing to poetry he knew. He winked wickedly at O'Malley and disappeared into one of the gaudier houses. The sky was dark. The fountain shone with a pale blue glow like a luminous bunny O'Malley had had on his nursery night-stand—how long ago?

There was litter in the plaza—a red neck cloth, a ration packet, a compass

with no possible meaning. Not little Vollmer's body, of course. He'd not expected there would be. The automatic sweepers that had once dusted away the children of a great race had seen to that. He watched the waters sparkle in the light of one moon risen and another rising.

"I will sit here and wait for the sweepers to pop out. Nuts, so quick, O'Malley? Talking to yourself?" He hoped the voice would say something, but he was not going to speak first. "No more out of the bottle, O'Malley. That's got to last and last. I'm scared and I want to go home. I wish Vollmer had never shown me where to find Earth in this sky. And I wish I wasn't going to forget so soon. I'm scared to learn if it's blue or green. I'm scared of the few nights left, when I'll follow it around the sky, and the sight of it will tear me to pieces. And most of all, I'm scared of the night when I'll look at it and giggle and not care."

Well, there she rose, low on the horizon. Vesper now, the evening star. O'Malley raised the bottle in salute toward the little blue spark. There was a sharp singing in the air. The bottle quivered and shattered in his hand. O'Malley lay his head on the cool blue rim of the fountain.

"No!" he whispered. "No! No!" and the bright waters rose toward his lips.



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